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A Saintly Epic: Reading *Beowulf* as Hagiography

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In his book *Genre,* Jonathan Frow asserts that
genre is "a matter of discrimination and taxonomy: of organising things into
recognisable classes" (51). He explains that science has inspired us with the
desire to classify and systematize everything so we can understand the world
around us. However, Frow points out that the theoretical practice of classify-
ing things in the real world is very complicated and that entities share char-
acteristics of multiple classes or genres—especially in literature. He identifies
several criteria used to determine a text's genre: semiotic medium (how a text is
delivered to the reader/listener), radical of presentation (first- or third-person
narration, delivery through song, etc.), mode (the themes and motifs present
in the text), genre (the specific elements required by a particular genre), and
sub-genre (themes and elements that restrict a text's classification even fur-
ther) (67).

After discussing these criteria, Frow concludes that instead of focusing on
assigning texts to static genres we should recognize that "there are never any
'correct' answers" to such questions; we should focus on how people actually
use different genres to interpret texts and see what they gain as a result (55). I
intend to use Frow's criteria to show how *Beowulf* (traditionally considered to
be an epic) can be read as a hagiography. After briefly describing what hagiog-
raphies are and what characteristics they tend to have, I will compare elements
of *Beowulf* to those of several hagiographies contemporary with the text. I will

compare them in terms of storyline and the different aspects of genre as defined above. In doing so, I am not claiming that it was originally written to be a hagiography; I am simply attempting to demonstrate the value of analyzing texts from different perspectives. By comparing *Beowulf* to canonical hagiographies, I will show how our understanding of texts and the cultures in which they are produced can deepen if we consider the conventions of various genres in our analysis.

Before looking at *Beowulf* as a hagiography, we must know what hagiographic texts look like. In the introduction to her book *Roads to Paradise*, Alison Godard Elliott explains that hagiographies tell the stories of saints' lives and are written to edify readers or listeners. She points out that hagiographies are more concerned with being inspiring than historically accurate; as a result, many of them seem fantastical. She reminds us, however, that we need not discard them simply because they are not completely factual: "Hagiography is not history" (7). This is a telling statement because it informs the way we should read hagiographies—not as histories, but as spiritually significant texts that encourage normal people to live faithfully. After cautioning us against approaching them as we approach other texts, Elliott introduces the formulaic plot that many hagiographies employ:

> Saints were heroes, no different in the popular imagination from many other beloved figures of story and legend. They worked wonders, defeated the forces of evil, and earned their just reward at the end of a life of trial. Moreover, while every man might not realistically aspire to winning the hand of a princess and acquiring a kingdom, all might hope to resist the wiles of the devil and attain the kingdom of heaven. (7)

In providing this general formula, Elliott tells us what to expect as we read hagiographies; she goes on to explain that there are generally two directions these stories can take: they can focus on the death of the saint (these stories are called "passions") or they can focus on the life of the saint (these stories are called "vitae"). I propose that *Beowulf* shares characteristics with both: the beginning of the work resembles a vita because it discusses Beowulf's marvelous physical triumphs over evil monsters, and the end resembles a passion by presenting Beowulf sacrificing himself for the good of his kingdom. In this way, he resembles many of the saints who die as martyrs, refusing to denounce their responsibility to Christ. Similarly, Beowulf does not shun his responsibilities as king; he feels a duty to fight the dragon that threatens his people's safety.

He states, "As king of the people I shall pursue this fight" (2513); his subsequent death seals his life of generosity and goodness. Beowulf's faithfulness in defending his people is described thus: "He worked for the people, but as well as that he behaved like a hero" (3006-7). Indeed, in Beowulf's case we could invert Elliott's statement that "saints were heroes" (7) and say that "heroes were saints."

In a similar vein, many scholars have drawn attention to what appears to be Christian symbolism in *Beowulf*. Edward Irving Jr. states that ever since the 1950s the consensus has been that the poem's narrator is "a Christian composing for a Christian audience" (177). Because of this, the narrator puts a Christian slant on everything. And while this telling of the tale may not be historically accurate (especially because Beowulf himself was probably not Christian), it supports Elliott's idea that hagiographies are not historical. What matters is whether it inspires readers/listeners to be better people. Irving identifies this spiritually didactic element of Beowulf by observing that the poet clearly condemns the Danes for worshiping heathen gods (lines 175-88). It is significant that Beowulf himself is not described as worshiping heathen gods; indeed, it could be claimed that the Danes are not delivered from Grendel's power precisely because they pray to false gods whereas Beowulf defeats Grendel because of his faith in the true God. Here Beowulf is portrayed as a saint who never wavers in his faith in the true God.

Like Irving, many other scholars have effectively argued that Beowulf has Christian overtones, but I intend to take their arguments a step further in order to show that, aside from simply containing anachronistic Christian elements, *Beowulf* qualifies as a full-fledged Christian hagiography. Here I will reference other Anglo-Saxon saints' lives from the perspective of Frow's criteria (semiotic medium, radical of presentation, mode, genre, and sub-genre) in order to compare them to *Beowulf*.

The semiotic medium of *Beowulf* is generally thought to be oral performance. Though the manuscript we study today is written, most scholars believe it was meant to be heard rather than read (*Beowulf*). In this respect it resembles hagiographies, which were often used in church to help those preaching communicate their ideas more effectively. And because not everyone could read, hagiographies were often designed to be short enough so that priests could read them in their entirety during their sermons. In this way, illiterate church members could benefit from the stories of saints' lives and apply the principles they learned. Beowulf is too long to be read in full in a church

service, but a priest could easily use segments of it to teach specific principles. For example, he could relate Beowulf's fight with Grendel (lines 662-835) as a parable to teach about overcoming sin, Beowulf's admission that God helped him defeat Grendel's mother (lines 1383-1650) as a tool to teach about humility, and Beowulf's fight against the dragon (lines 2510-2820) as a way to teach about protecting those under one's stewardship. Furthermore, *Beowulf*'s design as an oral poem shows that it could have been written as a hagiography (or at least that we can read it as such).

The radical of presentation in *Beowulf* is a poet speaking in the third-person. The narrator of the story is omniscient, just as the narrators in the lives of saints seem to be. *Guthlac A*, for example, tells the life of Guthlac, a hermit-saint who died in the beginning of the eighth century. Though there were presumably no witnesses for many of the events contained in the text, it contains details of his fights with devils and of his devotion to God. Since he or she was not physically present, the narrator must claim to have some degree of omniscience in order to help the reader believe the story. Similarly, Beowulf does not write his own biography; someone else chronicles his defeat of Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon. It is of course highly unlikely that the narrator accompanied Beowulf to the lair of Grendel's mother, but he nonetheless provides an extraordinarily detailed account of what happened. In this respect, *Beowulf*'s radical of presentation (an omniscient narrator relating a tale) is the same as that of most hagiographies.

The mode is perhaps the most convincing aspect of *Beowulf*'s potential designation as a hagiography. Elliott states that in hagiographies there is a "binary and inflexible opposition between Christian and pagan, good and evil" (14). We see this "inflexible opposition" in Beowulf in that there is no attempt to make Grendel or his mother seem human or pitiable. Grendel is called a "shadow-stalker" (703), a "monster" (737), and a "hell-serf" (786). His mother is called a "monstrous hell-bride" (1259), a "hell-dam" (1292), and a "wolfish swimmer" (1506). The two are called the offspring of Cain and are compared with devils and demons. The narrator likely vilifies them so readers will side with Beowulf and focus on God's deliverance of him, rather than wondering whether Grendel and his mother are subjects to be pitied. This simplification of characters and events to make the story easier to interpret is also visible in hagiographies—Guthlac's enemies are simply described as devils, for example, with no further character development that would allow us to pity them (255).

Another similarity between hagiographies and *Beowulf* is the lack of depth in the protagonist. *The Life of Cuthbert*, a seventh-century text about an English saint, presents Cuthbert as changing very little throughout his life. At a very young age he is called of God and ever after possesses great faith (45–6). He performs miracles and suffers for Christ, never wavering in his convictions. Similarly, Beowulf is a fairly static character, especially in the beginning of the book; he is always the strongest, he is always the leader, and he is nearly always the victor in the contests and battles he enters. Many other saints we read about are static in a similar way—Andreas (one of Christ's original apostles whose story is told in the text *Andreas*) is always a faithful and powerful disciple of Christ. Frideswide, an eighth-century English queen who renounces her position to devote her life to God, never looks back after deciding to become a nun, no matter how much she is tempted to do so (Frideswide).

Like these saints, Beowulf is possessed of constant strength and unwavering power in battle. Indeed, Beowulf's victories over monsters could be seen as physical counterparts to the spiritual triumphs of Guthlac over temptations and devils. While Guthlac confronts and is victorious over many demons throughout his life, Beowulf defeats Grendel, Grendel's mother, and ultimately the dragon (though it costs him his life). In Beowulf's final act we see another instance of his acting as an Old English saint would: he sacrifices himself so the dragon will not afflict his people.

Beowulf's burial is somewhat different from other saints' because he is not buried on land. Whereas most saints are buried and exhumed years later to reveal that their bodies are uncorrupted, Beowulf's body is launched into the water and then cremated. This ritual burial could be symbolic of the purifying of his flesh in preparation for him to inherit God's kingdom. In any case, his body is not corrupted by flesh worms or by time because his followers burn his remains entirely. And notwithstanding the fact that other saints' bodies are sources of divine miracles—for example, Frideswide's kiss heals a leper (150–3) and Cuthbert turns water into wine just by tasting it (88-9)—Beowulf continues to influence his people after his death by his legacy of generosity and friendship. His followers learn from his example and "let the ground keep" the dragon's treasure rather than allowing themselves to be corrupted by it (3166). They build a mound to remember Beowulf by and ever after look to him as an example of "heroic nature" and grace (3173).

Beowulf also resembles hagiographies in terms of genre, which Frow defines as the "thematic, rhetorical and formal dimensions" of a text (67). Hagiographies

clearly contain the themes of faith, sacrifice, and miracles; Beowulf contains Christian imagery and stories of physical triumphs that could be symbolic of such miracles. Thematically, then, the poem fits within the genre of hagiography. The rhetorical and formal dimensions of *Beowulf* also coincide with those of hagiographies, which, as Elliott explains, are often formulaic in nature. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe explains that many scholars have criticized *Beowulf* because it is very formulaic and because many of its lines appear elsewhere in the Old English canon (99–101). But hagiographies are also repetitive and predictable in their structure and wording. The repetition of epithets and ideas in *Beowulf* mirrors the repetition of plot elements in hagiographies—miracles, martyrdom, and so on—and meets the genre's rhetorical and formal demands.

Beyond containing these similarities, *Beowulf* also meets the criteria for the "subgenres" of hagiography—what Frow calls "the further specification of genre by a particular thematic content" (67). As stated earlier, Elliott distinguishes between two main types of hagiographies: passions and vitae. Beowulf exhibits characteristics of both (the first part of *Beowulf* resembling a vita and the second a passion), thus encompassing the entire genre. More research is needed to find even stronger links between the poem and these types of hagiographic texts, but looking at the basic characteristics of each shows that different parts of *Beowulf* qualify for each sub-genre.

Having established *Beowulf*'s potential designation as a hagiography, I turn to the issue of why it matters. In order to do this, I reiterate Frow's argument that it is important to look at the following question: "What models of classification are there, and how have people made use of them in particular circumstances?" (55). We could very well compare the aspects of other genres with *Beowulf*, and I believe it would yield interesting results. However, looking at this text through the lens of hagiography is especially beneficial as we attempt to understand early English texts because it helps us understand something of the history of Christianity in England. The Anglo-Saxons were writing hagiographies during the same period in which Beowulf was recorded and, just as the two genres overlap, the contexts in which the texts were produced are interrelated. Thus, this hagiographical reading of *Beowulf* relates directly to Anglo-Saxon culture and gives us insights into the development of Christian thought that existed in early England and that permeates literature for the next thousand years and more. Understanding the spread of Christianity will allow us to analyze this and other texts more intelligently and see their importance in the literary canon of the past and in that of the present.

This paper has shown that *Beowulf* could be read as a hagiography without too much effort on the part of the reader. Such an exercise will help readers develop a critical eye and learn more about how genre classifications affect our analysis of literature. As readers engage in these activities, they will learn more about the cultures in which and for which texts are produced. More importantly, they will learn to challenge traditional values, discarding those that are not useful and engaging with people around them in more productive and meaningful ways.

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